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(517) 373-7394

Articles in Today's Clips

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May 16, 2008

Angry court takes duped parents' side

BY BRIAN DICKERSON
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

Foiled in its efforts to terminate the parental rights of a Guatemalan couple, Michigan's Department of Human Services conspired to have the couple deported, then opened a new neglect case against them.

The play might have worked, too, but for the Michigan Court of Appeals, which ordered the Guatemalan family reunited and blistered DHS for its conduct in a scathing opinion issued this week.

Hugo Diaz and his wife, Floricelda, were supporting their two young children, an adult daughter and two grandchildren when DHS workers knocked on the door of the couple's Warren trailer two summers ago to investigate allegations that Diaz was molesting his granddaughters, then 2 and 4 years old.

An investigation failed to substantiate the charges, but DHS workers, alarmed at the children's congested living arrangements, successfully argued that the children should remain in state custody until their Spanish-speaking parents had undergone parental training.

Springing the trap

Macomb County Family Court Referee Deborah Brune ordered DHS to arrange a visitation between Hugo Diaz, his wife and adult daughter and the four children, who ranged from 2 to 10 years in age. But when the three adults arrived for the promised rendezvous, they were met instead by federal immigration agents, who detained them for being in the United States illegally. Within weeks, all three adults were deported -- sans children -- to Guatemala.

At a subsequent hearing to consider renewed neglect charges against the newly deported parents, Referee Brune angrily rejected the DHS's argument that the parents had abandoned their children, noting that the department itself had precipitated their deportation.

But she reluctantly terminated the couple's parental rights anyway, concluding that the state's "morally repugnant" conduct had made it impossible for Diaz and his wife to care for their kids.

A catch-22 defused

Luckily for Hugo Diaz, his court-appointed attorney, Maryanne Spryszak, wasn't about to let the matter drop there.

"To me, what the state had done in this case was shameful," Spryszak told me in a phone interview.

Wednesday, a unanimous state Court of Appeals panel agreed, concluding that DHS had moved against Diaz, his wife and daughter only precipitating the crisis that made it impossible for them to look after their children.

"The record establishes that [the parents] were bonded with their children and did not want to leave the children behind," Judge Kathleen Jensen wrote for the indignant panel. But because the children remained in state custody, she noted, Diaz, his wife and his daughter "were apparently never given the opportunity to take the children with them to Guatemala."

DHS spokesperson Colleen Steinman said only that the department's lawyers are studying their options for an appeal.

With any luck, Diaz and his family -- who have been separated for nearly two years -- will be reunited in Guatemala before the State of Michigan can wreak any more havoc in their lives.

Contact **BRIAN DICKERSON** at 248-351-3697 or bdickerson@freepress.com.



May 18, 2008

Two face charges after child taken into hospital

By SCOTT REES
Staff Writer

BATH TWP. — Two Bath Township residents have been arrested on counts of child abuse after waiting 13 hours to bring a 2-year-old child into the hospital for treatment of second degree burns from the waist down.

The child's mother, Holly Litwiller, 26, was charged with second degree child abuse and her live-in boyfriend, Lester Enness, 20, was charged with both first and second degree child abuse.

The hospital called Child Protective Services shortly after the child was brought into the hospital on May 7.

Det. Gary Smith, of the Bath Township Police Department, said it was believed the burns were caused by immersion in water, but without being there it is hard to tell for sure.

The child had suffered other injuries, mostly bruising caused from hands or other objects, he said.

"It's not just the burns. If you take away all the burns, it's not close to accidental," said Smith.

According to Smith, Litwiller and Enness waited 13 hours to get the child proper care, which was also cause of suspicion.

"If anybody were to look at this child's injuries, they would say, 'Oh my god, this child needs immediate care,'" he said.

"I know it's the worst case of child abuse I've ever worked," he added.

According to police chief Scott Rose, Litwiller is being held on bonds of \$500,000 and Enness is being held on bonds of \$1 million.

May 17, 2008

Meth lab bust in Bangor; 4 arrested

BANGOR -- Four people were arrested Friday in connection with a methamphetamine lab bust in Bangor, police said.

Narcotics detectives raided the residence at 401 Arlington St. at about 11 a.m. after receiving a tip about possible drug activity, according to the Van Buren County Sheriff's Office.

Suspected meth components were found in a small shed on the residence property, police said, and finished meth was found inside the house.

A truck used to transport meth components was seized by police, a news release said.

A 32-year-old Kalamazoo man and 42-year-old Kalamazoo woman who police said were inside the house at the time of the bust face charges of maintaining a drug house and possession of meth components.

A 33-year-old Kalamazoo man and 34-year-old Bangor woman also were interviewed by police, the news release said. Police said the two, whose names were not released, were interviewed after officers stopped a vehicle that left the Arlington Street residence prior to the raid.

The Bangor woman's three children were at the Arlington Street residence at the time of the police search and taken into custody by the Michigan Department of Human Services, the news release said.

The man who was in the car is charged with operating/maintaining a meth lab, while the woman faces charges of meth possession and maintaining a drug house.

Foster care can pose more options than adoption

LORI HOLCOMB • *THE ENQUIRER* • MAY 18, 2008

Gone are the dreams of traveling, spending the golden years by the beach and spoiling the grandchildren with sugar before sending them home to mom and dad.

The majority of Ross and Carolee Wyckoff's time is now spent driving their two granddaughters to choir, soccer and cheerleading practice, finishing homework and meeting with teachers.

Since taking in Irissa, 12, and Alana, 10, almost a decade ago, the Augusta couple's retirement plans, living situation and financial stability have changed completely.

Ironically, the logistics of raising the children wouldn't be quite as difficult if the Wyckoffs, who adopted the girls in 2002, had let them become part of the state foster care system.

Although the state tries to place foster children in the care of relatives, there is a stark difference in financial support and regulatory standards between kinship, or relative, care providers and licensed foster care providers.

A recent evaluation of the Michigan Department of Human Services by John Goad, titled "Michigan Department of Human Services: An evaluation of the capacity to assure the safety of foster children," states thousands of foster children placed in the care of relatives by MDHS are treated as "second class citizens" compared to those in licensed foster care homes and receive far less protection than children placed with licensed care providers.

When they took in the girls, Ross, 63, and Carolee, 59, sold the condominium they had recently moved into for a house with more room. They are still paying off the credit card debt racked up supplying necessities such as clothes, car seats, high chairs and a slew of other materials small children require.

The Wyckoffs adopted Irissa and Alana several years ago not knowing about the subsidies that would have been available before and after adoption if they had gone through the training to become licensed foster care providers.

"We probably would have done it had we known," Carolee said.

In addition to failing to provide adequate financial support to unlicensed relative care providers, the report stated MDHS allows placement of foster children with relatives known to be dangerous, with relatives about whom little or nothing is known and fails to provide "even the inadequate safeguards the agency provides children in licensed foster homes."

The state mandates children in the state foster care program are to receive at least one visit per month from case workers. The CRC report found about 17 percent of children in licensed foster homes received all of the required visits, compared to 8 percent of children in unlicensed homes. Since Irissa and Alana were not a part of the state's system, they only received annual visits that lasted about 30 minutes from court-ordered social workers. Even though Ross Wyckoff said a court-ordered social worker did a good job checking on the girls, but once a year wasn't often enough.

"The potential was there, if someone wanted to work the system, (take advantage of funding or mistreat a child) they could easily," Ross said.

SAFE AT HOME

According to the Child Welfare League of America in Washington, D.C., kinship care brings safety, nurturance and stability within the child's extended kin network. Congruent to the league's recommendation, the state makes a deliberate effort to place children with relatives rather than the homes of non-related foster care providers.

With more than 19,000 children in care of MDHS, Michigan has the seventh largest foster care system in the country. Of those children, more than 7,000 are placed with relatives, about 90 percent of whom are unlicensed, according to Goad's report.

Goad is an Illinois consultant hired to conduct an investigation by Children's Rights, the New York-based child advocacy group suing the state of Michigan for its shortcomings in foster care in the Dwayne B. vs. Granholm case. A separate review by the Wisconsin-based independent firm Children's Research Center was ordered by the case's judge, Nancy Edwards.

The reviews, both released in February, found critical failures in the foster care system. Goad's report likened MDHS managers to "blindfolded school

bus drivers" with "no way to know about the impending danger confronting their vulnerable passengers."

In 35 percent of cases of foster children placed with relatives, the CRC report found case workers failed to conduct the required criminal background and child abuse/neglect central registry checks on the relative care providers. Workers also did not conduct standard safety assessments in 73 percent of cases. The checks are not required for unlicensed kinship care homes but are recommended by child welfare groups such as the National Resource Center for Child Protective Services.

Evidence from Goad's study corroborated with the CRC's, pointing out MDHS rules permit the placement of foster children with relatives who MDHS knows to be dangerous. Having one's name on the child abuse/neglect central registry would prohibit a person from receiving a foster care license, but not from having a relative placed in their home as an unlicensed care provider.

The state requires background checks to be run on all care providers within one business day of placing a foster child into their care; automated checks are then made monthly. Currently, placement is prohibited with anyone who has felony convictions.

There are exceptions, however.

"We have to assess the situation, take the crime into account and make a determination if the child is in a safe environment," said Mary Chalman, manager of the MDHS foster care program office.

Calls to the Calhoun County DHS office regarding the placement of children in relative care were directed to the MDHS communications department, which chose Chalman as a spokesperson for the interview.

Chalman said factors such as the circumstance of the crime, their performance in rehabilitative classes, input from parole officers and current living situations are weighed when considering placing a child in the care of a relative with a criminal record, she said.

Good and bad placements, however, aren't always easy to determine.

When Child Protective Services took Jorden French from her parents about three years ago, CPS placed the child with her grandfather, Martin French of

Charlotte, and his wife, Lisa French. The girl, now 4, is in the process of being adopted by the Frenches.

In the early 1990s, French was convicted of child abuse and domestic violence involving his ex-wife, Ronda Ripley of Tennessee. He served 25 days for one charge and seven-and-a-half months on a work release program for the other.

The child abuse charge was recently expunged and since the domestic abuse charge was only a misdemeanor and Martin has had no major incidents in the past decade, the Frenches have maintained guardianship of Jorden.

"If we find a suitable placement, we're not going to keep looking for better," Chalman said.

If a person with Martin's background applied for a foster care license and Jorden was a foster child, however, she might not have been placed with him in the first place. MDHS rules allow children to be placed in the homes of unlicensed relatives that are on the central registry for convictions of crimes such as spousal or child abuse, neglect and drug-related criminal offenses although it would preclude the relative from receiving a foster care license, according to the Children's Foster Care Manual.

Martin French did not return phone calls, but his wife, Lisa French, said she believes Jorden is in the best place for her.

"(Martin) has grown up a lot and he's real good with Jorden," she said. "She's comfortable here. She's been here most of her life."

READY OR NOT

In many ways, licensed foster care providers know what they're getting into from the moment the child walks into their home. They know whom to call for medical assistance, are trained to deal with behavioral problems and, perhaps most importantly, have chosen to provide child care.

Conversely, many relative care providers didn't ask to raise a second set of children, but can't bear to let them go into the foster care system, said kinship coordinator Pat Scheid and oversight administrator Nancy French of Kinship Care Services.

KCS, a division of the Battle Creek-based Foster Adoptive Family Resource and Support Center, offers kinship care providers family outings, training

courses, resources, respite care and opportunities to meet others who can relate to their hardships and share their wisdom about working with the foster care system.

Scheid said unlicensed relatives usually miss out on benefits licensed providers receive because they are either afraid to ask for help or don't know to ask.

"Foster care providers have been through training and know what to ask for and how to push for it; relatives might not know what to ask for or how," French said. "And workers may assume if they need something they'll ask for it, which isn't necessarily true."

Licensed providers receive about \$14 to \$17 a day on average for one foster care child plus semi-annual clothing allowances of about \$100 to \$125, whereas unlicensed relatives are not eligible for any federally funded foster care payments. They can, however, apply for ineligible grantee funds, which are fewer than \$5 a day.

The state has recognized the differences in support for licensed and unlicensed providers and is taking steps to encourage relatives to go through foster care training, said Valarie Cunningham of the Kalamazoo-based child welfare agency Family and Children Services.

In 2007, legislation was enacted granting an allowance of \$2.5 million to help private foster care agencies license more than 1,000 relative care providers in this year.

"It really is about the safety and well being of children," she said, which is increased through licensing when relatives receive the same amount of training, assessment and reimbursement that unrelated foster parents currently receive.

Currently, however, most relatives either never learn about the opportunities or don't take advantage of them, Scheid said.

"Usually, they're just happy to have the situation straightened out and frequently feel they don't need to have someone looking over their shoulder or more involvement," she said.

TRIAL AND ERROR

The case of Dwayne B. vs. Granholm is set to go to trial June 3. The prosecution, represented by Children's Rights, will present the cases of numerous children who suffered or died in the Michigan foster care system, including Heather, a 15-year-old girl who was placed in the home of an uncle.

The state requires home studies, or site visits, start upon the placement of a child and be completed within 30 days. It wasn't until seven months after she was placed in her uncle's home that a case worker performed a home study. The case worker reported the house had 17 inhabitants and was filthy.

Eventually, Heather, who had documented severe mental health problems, ran away to live with her grandmother in South Carolina. After confirming with a South Carolina child welfare agency that Heather was OK, contact from MDHS dropped off and the agency didn't address her mental health problems. In December 2004, about a year and a half after running away to South Carolina, Heather committed suicide there.

Heather's death is one of many examples of abuse and shortcomings across all areas of Michigan's foster care system, said Sarah Bartosz, senior attorney for Children's Rights' case against the state.

The DHS spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet declined to comment on the lawsuit.

Besides struggling for some medical benefits, Sharon Dewey of Battle Creek, who has provided foster care for several decades, said she has never had any major problems with the local DHS.

"I don't know if it's because I've been there so long most of them know me ... but it's been a really good agency for me," Dewey said.

Unfortunately, Michigan's and several other states' foster care programs need major overhauls system-wide, Bartosz said.

A quality assurance agency, more training and continuing education for caseworkers and supervisors, funding and more workers are needed to handle the heavy case loads in order to make the Michigan's child care system competent, she said.

Bartosz said she believes relative placement is often the best choice when it's available, but "the dual system of unlicensed relatives versus licensed providers need to be restructured so they are treated evenly."

Further, she said, kinship placement is better only on the premise the relative is competent, qualified and supportive.

"It requires careful study and exercising foresight to be sure when you remove a child from a home, you do everything you can to make sure the first placement is the best that can be provided at that time," she said.

In the meantime, the Wyckoffs said they are finding ways to make their second round as parents even better than the first by spending more time with their granddaughters, who said they are happy with their living situation.

Like many relative care providers, DHS was only minimally involved with the Wyckoffs' adoption because the children never went into the foster care system. But for the children who have to rely on the state to find suitable homes, Carolee said she worries about who is really looking out for their best interests.

Brief visits by case workers once a month aren't enough to determine what is really going on in a care giver's home, Carolee said.

"It's scary to think our kids don't have any more protection than they do," Carolee said.

Lori Holcomb can be reached at 966-0675 or lholcomb@battlecr.gannett.com.



THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Foster care needed for kids in crisis Area homes opened to 244

Saturday, May 17, 2008

BY JO COLLINS MATHIS

The Ann Arbor News

Dennis Patrick and his partner never planned to adopt four children.

But once they became foster parents and realized how many kids need good homes, they knew they had to think big.

"Kids can be incredibly challenging, but they're also rewarding, which is why we still do it," said Patrick, who with his partner, Tom Patrick, recently welcomed a 13-year-old foster child into their home. That's in addition to their four adopted sons, who started out in foster care with them.

Patrick was one in a small crowd who tied 244 turquoise ribbons onto bushes along Michigan Avenue in Ypsilanti Friday to mark National Foster Care Month.

Each ribbon represents a child in Washtenaw County foster homes.

Everyone believes children should be in a safe, loving home, said Mary Hewlett, Washtenaw County regional director of the Judson Center, a nonprofit human service agency in Royal Oak that offers foster care services to 10 Michigan counties.

"But foster parents go that extra mile, step up and take children into their homes," she said.

More than 19,000 Michigan youths are in foster care because their own families are in crisis and are unable to provide for them. Of the 69 children who entered the foster care system in Washtenaw County last year, 34 were from Ypsilanti.

That's why Ypsilanti residents are especially encouraged to become foster parents, said Jennifer Kiehl, Judson Center foster care supervisor.

There's also a great need for homes willing to accept groups of siblings and teenagers.

"I often tell foster parents that they don't always see the difference they're doing while they're doing it," Kiehl said. "It's years later when the child comes back to you, and they're grown, and they're thanking you for what you've done."

Foster parents receive \$14.83 a day for children up to age 12 and \$18.26 for those 13 to 18. Those who go into it for the money soon realize it doesn't pay, Kiehl said.

"If you're a foster parenting a child well, you won't be making any money," Kiehl said, noting that foster parents provide food, clothing, and transportation as well as their time.

Renee Smith, a program manager at the Department of Human Services, said state and private agencies collaborate in recruiting and retaining foster parents. Smith said licensed foster homes are needed for children of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, all ages and both sexes.

Patrick, who lives in Superior Township, said potential foster parents must be patients and understanding and realize how a child can be affected by his history.

"And you have to love kids and want to make a difference in their lives," he said.

For information on becoming a foster parent, call Margie Yaeger at 734-481-8408.

Jo Mathis can be reached at jmathis@annarbornews.com or 734-994-6849.

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Monday, May 19, 2008

Michigan dad fights for joint custody law

Parents' equal access to children called a civil rights issue; critics say policy may hurt kids.

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

Robert Pedersen was devastated three years ago when a divorce judge said he could see his two children only a few days a month.

Pedersen's divorce agreement now includes long weekends, a Wednesday overnight visit and half of summers, holidays and spring breaks with his children. It's almost enough time to make him feel that he can provide an equal amount of parenting to his kids.

Michigan law recommends that custody decisions be based on which parent has been the primary caregiver unless it can be shown that another arrangement is more appropriate, but Pedersen and other noncustodial parents are fighting to modify the law so joint physical custody becomes the norm. They view equal parenting access as a civil rights issue, but opponents say equal time isn't always best for children.

"With the pain of a divorce, a lot of stupid decisions are made initially as far as the kids go," said Pedersen, who plans to ride his bike from Lansing to Washington, D.C., this summer to raise awareness of the issue. "There are different contributions that Mom and Dad make to a child, and kids need both of them."

Noncustodial fathers think gender bias plays a role in these decisions and reduces them to visitors who pay child support. Children need both parents equally, they say.

But many custodial parents, family law attorneys and domestic violence activists oppose making joint custody mandatory.

They say every family is different, and 50-50 custody doesn't work in every situation.

It becomes especially difficult when parents live in different school districts or one of them doesn't want joint custody. Another factor is that mandating joint custody can sometimes disrupt a child's stability.

"When a child's whole world is changing, we want to keep as much stable in their lives as we can," said Karen Sendelbach, chair of the Family Law Section of the State Bar of Michigan.

Other opponents say noncustodial parents sometimes want joint custody simply to even the score with their ex-partner or to reduce their child support obligation. A noncustodial parent's support payments can drop by as much as 40 percent if the child stays overnight 128 times or more each year.

"The 50-50 custody split is more about people not wanting to feel the other parent has won," said Kent Weichmann, chair of the Legislative Committee of the Family Law Section.

"It has nothing to do with the relationship with the child. It's more about who's winning. It also has to do with paying less child support."

More dads join movement

But supporters say this issue is not ever going to go away, especially as more fathers join the movement, including movie stars Alec Baldwin and Denzel Washington.

"It's a civil rights movement that is coming into its own," said David L. Levy, CEO of the Children's Rights Council, based outside Washington, D.C.

"It goes to the core of the right of a human being: the right to be a parent to your child, and of the children to be part of your life."

Next to child support, child custody is perhaps the most heated issue between parents when they split up and try to restructure their lives with their children.

Michigan hasn't kept reports on custody arrangements for several years, but the latest information, in 2003, shows that the Friend of the Court recommended physical custody of the children for mothers in 68 percent of the 14,470 cases that year, while fathers were recommended 12 percent of the time. Joint custody was recommended in 2,717 cases -- about 18 percent.

While noncustodial mothers are also part of the joint custody movement, it is spearheaded primarily by fathers and appears to be gaining momentum nationally.

More than 25 states have laws regarding joint custody that are much stronger than Michigan's, Levy said.

Since the 1990s, Michigan fathers have been trying to get the laws changed to force the courts to immediately presume equal joint custody.

A hearing was recently held on the fourth bill introduced in the Michigan Legislature, but it was not voted out of the House Judiciary Committee. It includes an exception for unfit parents.

In between the four pieces of legislation, the fathers launched a failed petition drive to put the ballot before voters and also were unsuccessful in a class action lawsuit in federal court.

Moms' groups eclipsed

Michigan dads say their effort is growing -- four new state organizations support the issue, and their ranks have grown from 5,000 to 20,000 people, said Lake Orion resident Jim Semerad, one of the leaders in Michigan's movement.

The growth appears to be eclipsing grass-roots groups headed by custodial mothers. The Association for the Enforcement of Child Support, a national group, was founded in Toledo in 1984 by activist Geraldine Jensen. She had a base in Ann Arbor for two years, before her 2004 retirement, which galvanized a number of Metro Detroit activists.

The organization is now headquartered in Cleveland, has become more virtual and is less visible in Michigan.

ACES executive director Debbie Klein is not concerned about Michigan fathers' activism.

They have always had more time and money to lobby lawmakers, while mothers tend to devote their time to raising the children, she said.

Joint custody simply cannot work for everyone, Klein said, because some couples are never going to be able to get along.

And it's the conflict between the parents in broken families that is most devastating to children, not the actual divorce.

"It puts the children in a horrible situation," Klein said. "That's what custody should always be about; it should always be about what's best for the children."

'It's the right thing to do'

Many fathers say it's best for children to be with both parents and that they will keep fighting until the law changes in Michigan.

"It's the right thing to do," Semerad said.

It's also why Pedersen, 36, is training every morning for his 758-mile bike trek in August with five other fathers to spread the word about what they think should be the law of the land.

"Kids do best with shared parenting, as long as it doesn't disrupt the school schedule and the parents are fit and willing," Pedersen said.

You can reach Kim Kozlowski at (313) 222-2024 or kkozlowski@detnews.com.

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May 17, 2008

'Downturn in donations' felt at local shelter

Faith-based Hannah's House struggles in poor economy

Ryan Loew
Lansing State Journal

Shameka Briscoe, 21, finished making a taco dinner while housemate Aaryca Drane, 18, sat on a couch in the living room doing geometry homework.

But before Briscoe had a chance to eat, a wail came from the dining room that could not and would not be ignored.

"My food's still in the kitchen and she's in my arms," Briscoe said laughing as she comforted her 5-month-old daughter, Ania Anderson. "Mission accomplished."

It's a typical night at Hannah's House, a Christian transitional shelter for women who are homeless and pregnant.

But this year "a dramatic downturn in donations" has left the shelter in "serious trouble," Director Stephanie K. Johnson said.

"We're a faith-based ministry and we go by faith, and faith says we're not gonna close," Johnson said. "But if we don't get some more donations, we are in serious trouble."

Johnson said that absent some grants, the house receives, about 75 percent of its funding comes from donations.

Tough economic times may have led to the decrease in donations, Johnson said, and the rising costs of everything from groceries to utilities haven't helped either.

It's a situation other homeless shelters have dealt with statewide, said Mary Lou Keenon, communications director for the Michigan State Housing Development Authority.

"The economic times are not conducive to people being able to help in a way that they have in the past," she said. "I think that all, not just faith-based, but all organizations that provide support to those experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness are experiencing decreases in the amount of giving."

Unlike a traditional homeless shelter, Hannah's House residents stay for extended periods of time, Johnson said.

The shelter is currently at capacity with three women. Five are on the waiting list. Openings do pop up often, though, Johnson said, as some women stay for just a few weeks.

While there, the women receive shelter, meals and baby supplies as well as education on parenting, home management and newborn care, all at no cost.

Women can stay at the house for as long as they are pregnant and for nine months following the birth, Johnson said, and then they have to move on.

"It is a time-frame game, because they've only got that nine months to get on their feet," Johnson said, "but most of them, when they leave here, they don't go back onto the street. They have

somewhere to go."

Briscoe hopes to go back to school. Drane hopes to get her own place this summer.

And Johnson hopes to keep Hannah's House available to women like Briscoe and Drane.

"We totally believe that God's going to see us through," Johnson said. "However, we don't know what the future holds for Hannah's House. But as long as we're here, we're going to keep helping."

Contact Ryan Loew at 377-1206 or rloew@lsj.com.



Church worker plans to go homeless for a week

Sunday, May 18, 2008

By Charles Honey

Press Religion Editor

HOLLAND -- Pushing his son in a stroller past pretty beds of tulips, Matthew Lehr does not look like a man searching for homeless people.

But after months of seeking out Holland's homeless, he knows he probably won't find them sleeping on sidewalks. They are more likely to be riding a bike issued by a shelter or idling on a park bench.

"I didn't think there were (homeless) people down here, but God kind of opened my eyes," Lehr said as he pushed 11-month-old Matthew through Centennial Park.

"If we were in Grand Rapids right now, people would be sleeping on the grass," he added as a bright sun lit up the greenery. "People just don't do that here. But the problem is still here."

Lehr sees the problem of homelessness hidden among the spanking-clean streets and blooming flowers of Holland. He wants others to see it, too.

That's why he plans to spend this week living on the streets, with nothing but a Bible and the clothes on his back.

He'll search for pop cans to cash their deposits, seek out free meals and visit a church to see how they treat him. He planned to fast Saturday and today, as well as next Friday and Saturday, to get a sense of chronic hunger.

He will spend two nights at the Holland Rescue Mission and the rest outside, staying awake at night and sleeping by day.

For Lehr, going homeless is not a stunt but his way of serving God's hungry children.

"I'm not trying to say I know how it feels to be homeless," said Lehr, 30. "I'm doing it to bring awareness and to walk in their shoes a little bit."

He also hopes to help Arlo Kelly. Through his "Hungry for the Homeless" Web site, Lehr is seeking counseling, housing and other resources to help the homeless man get a job and reunite with his wife and two daughters in Indiana.

Kelly hopes Lehr's effort will give the homeless a better image.

"We are human beings, too," said Kelly, 33, who stays with various friends. "We're just less fortunate right now."

Lehr's week of homelessness should shed needed light on a largely hidden population, said Darryl Bartlett, executive director of the Holland Rescue Mission.

"There's 150 people behind the door or under the roof of Holland Rescue Mission facilities each night," Bartlett said.

A one-day January survey by the Ottawa Area Housing Coalition found 388 people were homeless or at imminent risk. The total is "a very significant undercount" because it only includes those who sought services or were in shelters that day, said coalition co-coordinator Mark Kornelis.

Lehr said he knows he can't make a big dent in the numbers, but believes he can help some people and motivate others to get involved.

"It's not necessarily our responsibility to try to fix everybody, but to show them the love of Jesus," said Lehr, a community outreach worker at Calvary Christian Reformed Church. "I just try to show them that someone loves them."

He began visiting the homeless about three years ago while living in Grand Rapids. On his way to work at Oliver Products, he noticed a man living under the U.S. 131-Int. 196 overpass. When he brought him a sandwich, a Coke and a candy bar, the man said, "I can't believe you're down here to see me."

His subsequent marriage to his wife, Keely, brought him to Holland and a new homeless population.

Keely at first worried whether he'd be safe going homeless. But she believes he'll do "just fine" thanks to his street smarts.

"He's got such a big heart, and he's very passionate about what he does," said Keely, 31. "When he goes for something, he definitely goes big."

Lehr says he doesn't worry about his safety, or his ability to rustle up extra clothes and fashion a cardboard shelter. Another homeless acquaintance, Lenny Golinski, will show him survival skills when Lehr hits the streets Monday.

For his soul survival, though, Lehr will turn to another helper.

"I'm going to rely on God to get me through this whole event," he said. "I'm looking at it as an opportunity to get closer to God."

Send e-mail to the author: choney@grpress.com

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Left behind

by Lynn Moore | The Muskegon Chronicle

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Chronicle/NickTremmel

Jonathan Cole, 16, is the oldest of nine children in a "working poor" household. He dropped out of high school after falling behind, partly because he was needed to help care for his siblings.

Pressure to help family often trumps an education

Eventually it all became too much for Jonathan Cole -- the time missed from school to take care of his siblings; the repeated moves to new schools; the realization that he was getting further and further behind his classmates. So, he took the path that many kids bearing the burden of poverty take: He dropped out of school.

The oldest of nine children of "working poor" parents, Jonathan, 16, often was called on to stay home from school and take care of his younger siblings. He was torn away from teachers and friends over and over as he bounced from schools in Holton, Hesperia, Reeths-Puffer and Whitehall. "When I get older, I'm going to make sure my family's not going to struggle like that," said Jonathan, who's hoping to earn his high school diploma through adult education.

His story is one that's all-too-familiar to educators who find themselves battling the effects of poverty and Michigan's faltering economy. As is often the case with social injustice, the youngest citizens suffer the most.

Half of all schoolchildren in Muskegon County qualify for free or reduced lunches -- more than 40 percent of them getting lunches for free. In 2004, the last year for which a number is available, 9,782 children in the county were living in poverty -- a 34 percent increase since 2000, according to the Kids Count in Michigan 2007 Data Book.

Undoubtedly those numbers have grown over the last four years as more area service agencies report increased needs in everything from food stamps to housing. In March, 16,775 homes in Muskegon County were receiving food stamps, up 52 percent since 2004.

For many children in poverty, their biggest safety net is their school. It is there where they find stability, regular nutritious meals, warm surroundings and caring teachers.

But schools also can pose the biggest challenges for poor children like Jonathan Cole as they grow older. Schoolwork gets tougher and the amount of homework grows exponentially -- a hardship for students whose parents can't help figure out algebra problems either because they're working or because their own education is lacking.

For Jonathan, friends became the source of help on homework.

But there are other pressures -- namely, social ones -- for teens in school. Sometimes it's just easier to stay home from school if your clothes are filthy because your parents couldn't afford to get to the Laundromat, or if you don't even know where they are because you've moved around so much. It becomes increasingly difficult to hide the fact you have fallen so far behind in your studies.

In this backdrop of growing poverty and family hardships, schools are facing greater pressures to make sure "no child is left behind." Numerous studies have proven children in poverty have greater struggles with achievement -- Jonathan's story explains many of the reasons why -- yet schools are required to improve achievement or face sanctions. The sanctions put even more financial pressure on schools suffering from the effects of Michigan's poor economy.

The largest source of financial support for schools is the state sales tax. It doesn't take a working knowledge of algebra to realize that when the working people in Michigan are struggling, they aren't going to buy as much. And hence, sales tax revenues drop.

As a result, schools have been forced to cut services that could help struggling students. Classes are getting bigger, counselors are being eliminated and after-school opportunities are dwindling.

Of course, education is supposed to be the great equalizer. Get a good education, students are told, and anything's possible. Stay in school, study hard and you too can be successful.

"Those speeches sound good," said Don Jones, a Muskegon Public Schools special advocate for at-risk students. "But they don't sound so good when you're hungry."



Chronicle/NickTremmel

Martin Cole counts the number of stick-on tattoos his son Emmett, 3, has while holding his 8-month-old daughter Arianna at their Muskegon home. He is a carpet layer and often struggles to find work.

Poverty and achievement

Stacy Cole worries. She worries about the effects of poverty on her nine children. The economy is "hurting everybody all over," she said.

"Since we have a bigger family, it's even harder."

Try finding a landlord who wants to rent to a family of 11. It's not easy, and so moving around a lot is necessary.

Try finding work as a carpet layer, the vocation of Stacy's husband, Martin, when the economy is in the pits and no one's buying new carpet. It requires you to move around a lot to chase work.

"It's the oldest ones who had their roots uprooted," Stacy Cole said of her eldest three, Jonathan; Christina, 16; and Alexander, 15. "I wonder how it affects their self-esteem."

She knows it's affected Alexander, a student at Bunker Middle School. He went through a depression phase when he wouldn't shower or change out of his pajamas. He got in with a bad crowd and started skipping school.

That's when he came to the attention of Rick Versalle, Muskegon Public Schools' attendance officer. It's Versalle's job to find out why students aren't showing up to school and find a way to get them there.

More often than not, poverty figures into the equation.

Versalle has been inside homes where piles of blankets on the floor are children's beds. He's talked to children who have just two outfits to wear to school. He knows of parents who work second shift and can't be home to help with homework or enforce bed times -- or for whom sleeping can be more important than getting up and taking children to school.

"Sometimes it's just easier for them to keep their kids home," Versalle said. He knows of children who are responsible for getting themselves up and off to school because their parents are working. He knows of children whose first job in the family is to take care of younger siblings rather than be a student.

He's seen children who are hungry, and so he uses free breakfast at school as a motivator to get them to class.

"I don't know about you, but I don't function well when I'm hungry,"

Versalle said. "These kids don't have the fuel to be alert and ready to learn."

Ready to learn. It's an educators' term that says a lot about how poor children and nonpoor children start out their school careers. It says a lot about achievement, and why test scores in urban, poorer districts consistently lag behind suburban counterparts.

Versalle's caseload is so large, he must focus his time on elementary and middle school students -- those who have a better chance of overcoming the circumstances of life they don't deserve and didn't choose.

"There's a lot of issues going on in these families," Versalle said. "And education takes a back seat."

"Sometimes the best you can do is get them to school -- they might not be passing classes, but they're there."



Chronicle/Nick

Tremmel

Marquette Elementary teacher Cheri Millisor high fives JaMauni Thomas, 8. "They have so many pressures and so many other distractions," Millisor says of her students' families.

Taking on more than education

The woman was sitting before Marquette Elementary third-grade teacher Cheri Millisor at a parent-teacher conference when she burst into tears. She was there to talk about her child's performance in school. But something bigger was nagging at her.

"She said 'I'm so embarrassed,' " Millisor recalled recently. " 'We don't have a place to stay.' "

Her family was homeless, living in a tiny motel room with no idea where to turn for help other than their child's teacher.

Millisor didn't let them down. She turned to the school's Family Resource Center, operated by the Department of Human Services, which found a home for the family within two days.

Millisor's story says many things. It speaks to the incredible stresses that families live under -- and that children absorb and bring to school with them. It talks about the success of community initiatives like the Family Resource Centers that provide one-stop access to a variety of services and are located in schools where staff form connections with families.

And it says a lot about the commitment of parents -- no matter how poor they might be -- to the education of their children. Struggling with homelessness and poverty, this parent managed to find a way to get to a parent-teacher conference.

"They have so many pressures and so many other distractions," Millisor said of her students' families. "The frustration is immense."

To better understand those distractions, and to form the connections that get parents to open up, Millisor visits the homes of all her students prior to the start of the school year.

To let her students vent their worries, they all sit cross-legged on the floor in the morning and greet each other and share their thoughts for the day.

Millisor remembers one girl who shared a brilliant discovery her family had made: that adding butter to flour mixed in water -- their typical breakfast -- makes it taste better.

It is not unusual for Millisor to send food home with her children.

Sometimes she'll order pizzas for a family she knows would otherwise skip dinner; or even though it might be against the rules, send home an extra sack lunch.

Districts do things like buy alarm clocks for students to get them up in the morning, buy students bus passes, cover the cost of athletic uniforms that other districts charge students for, stock up on warm coats and boots and even purchase beds for students' homes.

Muskegon moved to all-day kindergarten to help parents avoid the cost of child care -- or the prospect of leaving a child at home alone or in the care of a sibling. The district has altered bus routes to pick up students who, if left to walk to school, likely would stay home when the weather is bad because they don't have boots.

It is those types of interventions that educators are taking on to combat the effects of poverty and offer children hope for salvation that education can provide.

"The children in poverty are just as intelligent as the children who don't live in poverty," Millisor said. "They have just as many creative thoughts. They have the same problem-solving abilities. The same ability for in-depth thinking.

"These are brilliant children."

Cuts rather than fixes

One of the toughest realities for educators is that they have a pretty good idea how to help students living in poverty, but they can't afford it.

Instead, districts are making cuts to such services as counseling at a time when children are under greater stress.

Orchard View Superintendent Patricia J. Walstra said educators there have noticed a recent increase in elementary students who are "angry" and acting out.

"You can't really put your finger on (why), other than it's a tense time and children absorb a lot of it," Walstra said.

She said more children are taking care of themselves at home, and it's starting to show up in test scores.

"Young children are having to step up to the plate and take more responsibility when they're not really ready," Walstra said.

That could be helped with more free afterschool programs that include homework help. But who's going to pay for it?

Muskegon Superintendent Colin Armstrong has a list of initiatives he would undertake if money was no object. They include hiring more advocates to support at-risk students; providing tutors who are certified teachers at every elementary for struggling students; providing computers in classrooms with updated remediation software for students who need more help understanding teachers' lessons; on-site daycare or, better yet, a special school for teen moms; decreasing class sizes for fourth- and fifth-graders; and extending the school day for high school students who need to pick up extra credits.

Instead he's grappling with \$3.5 million in cuts next year, which he said will hit teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians and administrators "across the board."

"You hit a financial wall before you meet the need," Armstrong said. "All of it can be fixed. It's our job to fix it."



End poverty

Saturday, May 17, 2008

Grand Rapids received national attention Wednesday when Democrat John Edwards endorsed his former rival, Sen. Barack Obama, for the Democratic presidential nomination during a campaign rally at the Van Andel Arena. The opportunity to showcase positive images of the city on a national level was good for the area and the state. What's also good not only for Michigan but the country is to hear all three remaining presidential candidates talk about making poverty a priority in their administration, a point highlighted at Wednesday's rally by Mr. Edwards and Mr. Obama.

Poverty isn't a partisan issue, when it imposes costs on the nation that can affect the economy as a whole and drags people down into lives of limited alternatives and desperate choices.

Sen. John McCain said he would make the eradication of poverty a top priority of his administration. Mr. Obama joined Mr. Edwards in pledging to fight to cut poverty in half within 10 years. And Sen. Hillary Clinton said she'd have a poverty czar in a cabinet level position.

Whichever one emerges as president, we expect them to pursue this critical issue with the same passion expressed on the campaign trail. In 2005, 37 million people in the United States lived below the poverty line. The average threshold for a family of four was an income of \$19,971, according to a 2007 Government Accountability Office report on "Poverty in America." This percentage was significantly larger for kids, minorities and those living in certain geographic areas, such as inner cities and rural areas. The impact on the nation and its economy can be seen in government spending on vital assistance programs and in productivity losses. The effects of poverty such as poor health, crime, lower educational quality and attainment negatively impacts economic growth.

The candidates are campaigning when many Americans face economic hardship. In Michigan, that's been awhile with the loss of manufacturing and other jobs. Besides struggling to fill their tanks as gas prices soar, now \$4 in Michigan, people are having trouble paying utility bills, mortgages/rent, and putting food on the table. The cost for food for home consumption increased faster in 2007 than at any time since 1990, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In December, eggs and milk were up 29 percent and 20 percent, respectively, from a year earlier. Michigan has a record number of people, 1.2 million on food stamps. Americans receiving food stamps is projected to reach 28 million in the coming year, the highest level since the program began in the 1960s.

There are too many terrible realities for individuals and the country if poverty doesn't receive serious attention. Wednesday's rally put the spotlight on Grand Rapids, and also squarely on the poverty issue all three candidates have embraced. We expect the next president, whoever that is, to back up promises with action. We will know that face in November. But the faces of poverty are many.

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The Arab American News

ACCESS celebrates 37th anniversary

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Detroit — To kick off its 37th year of service and for the first time in 25 years without Ismael Ahmed as its executive director, ACCESS held its annual dinner — probably the largest Arab American dinner in the country — May 10 at the Detroit Marriot.

ACCESS spokespeople said nearly 2,000 attended.

The group handed out awards to three people, including Ahmed, who now heads the Michigan Department of Human Services.

Ahmed was named Arab American of the Year, U.S. Rep. John Dingell received a special tribute award and philanthropist Russell Ebeid, director of Guardian Industries, was presented the Making an Impact Award.

Ebeid was honored for his charitable efforts, including a \$750,000 fund he recently established through the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan to be used to support various causes, like 71 four-year scholarships for Arab American students attending Kettering University.

Dingell was awarded for, the group said, never shying away from Arab and Arab American issues in Congress.

Ahmed was awarded for reaching a position as influential as director of the Michigan DHS and for his decades of leadership within ACCESS.

In his remarks he said "We live in a world today of, frankly, war, empire, starvation... We live in a pretty difficult world and very difficult here, too, in Michigan. There are about a fifth of the people who live here in Michigan are

in or near poverty and one out of three people are considered low income. What that really means is they don't make enough money to live. This is not a time for us to be sedated. It is a time where we need to stand up to these questions... Working with the people at ACCESS, I've come to believe that each person can make a serious difference... I've also learned that a dedicated group of people, even a small group of people, can change this world."



STATE OF MICHIGAN

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY HEALTH
LANSING

JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

JANET OLSZEWSKI
DIRECTOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

CONTACT: James

McCurtis

May 16, 2008

(517) 241-2112

Michigan Department of Community Health Recognizes HIV Vaccine Awareness Day

In honor of those working toward the development of an HIV vaccine, Governor Jennifer Granholm today issued a proclamation recognizing May 18 as HIV Vaccine Awareness Day.

Within the State of Michigan, the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) estimates that there are 18,000 people currently living with HIV/AIDS, as of January 2008. Over half of those reported have a diagnosis of AIDS.

"It is imperative, now more than ever, to accelerate efforts in clinical research to develop a preventive HIV vaccine," said Janet Olszewski, director of the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH). "A preventive vaccine could save thousands of lives in Michigan alone."

During this observance, organizers are asking people to recognize HIV vaccine research by wearing a red AIDS ribbon upside down on May 18. The upside-down AIDS ribbon forms a "V" for "vaccines," and symbolizes the urgent need to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Despite the availability and success of HIV treatment drugs, researchers continue to work together to find a safe and effective HIV vaccine. In doing so, an HIV vaccine offers the best hope to controlling the global pandemic of HIV/AIDS by preventing new infections, as well as the possibility of delaying the onset of AIDS in those already infected.



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For more information on National Vaccine Awareness Day, please visit the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease Web site at
<http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/news/events/HVAD/>.

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